

Black As Coal

by Dawn Hutchison

My great-grandfather was a coal miner. He lived in Roanoke, Illinois where he raised 11 children in a house close to mine. The slag from the mine was mounded into huge piles, extending several hundred feet up into the sky. These mountains were as black as the coal from which they came and they were called jumbos. A track was built up the side of the jumbo in order to transport more material to the top of the mound. My great-grandfather was a supervisor and was the first to enter the mine. He made sure it was safe and that there was air for the men to breathe. The mules used to transport the coal and slag lived underground and were blind from living in darkness. In the summertime children played on the jumbo, as if it was a pile of sand. The mules were brought up from the mines in the summer, and lived in the care of local farmers. The children rode on the strong backs of the mules, but the animals had to be led since they could not see.

Climb the jumbo, children.
run and slide
down
into the dark, dark grains
until it stains your thin, young limbs,
painting your cheeks a chalky black.

Climb the jumbo, children.
play in the slag your father drew,
—cart by blind muled cart.
And play in the soil of your father's sweat,
of your father's blood,
of your father's life.

Play in the mountain
your mother wet with tears,
and mold your castles
with the darkened grains.
And watch
as she alone calls you home, children,
wringing her hands
in an apron black.